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OUR MERCANTILE MARINE ¹

ALBERT MCCLELLAN MATHEWSON

OUR mercantile marine and preparedness are so closely interwoven that a discussion of one necessarily includes the other. It is so closely allied to the defense of the country that it is almost as necessary for the government to encourage the maintenance of a good mercantile marine as to maintain a navy. The restoration of the American mercantile marine is a subject which has for years interested the public and been earnestly discussed in Congress, but still the American flag fails to fly over our commerce or even to protect our domestic mails.

The laws of this country compel capital engaged in the ocean-carrying trade to pay more for its steamers than it would be required to pay if purchased in the open market; to give higher wages to its seamen and to employ more and better-paid officers, and to furnish better quarters for these men. Even with these laws wiped from our statute-books it is doubtful if capital would seek investment in our mercantile marine, or the flag of the United States float over any appreciable increase of commerce. Every nation which has a mercantile marine has built it up and maintained it with subsidies and bounties, and the United States must meet this competition or lay itself open to criticism because of its unpreparedness.

Three subjects are closely connected with our national preparation which are not properly covered by the maintenance of a navy: first, an efficient and widespread ship-building industry; second, a trained body of seafaring men; third, merchant vessels available for naval purposes in times of need. A great majority of the people of this country are opposed to the investment of government funds in any field of business which brings it in competition with private capital or with work

¹ Discussion at the meeting of the Academy of Political Science, November 12, 1915.

which private capital should finance, but the present situation of the country demands that determined effort should be made to encourage the development of our mercantile marine.

One of the greatest obstacles to this development is the difference in wages paid American and foreign seamen, and it is certainly necessary for us as a nation to have a body of seamen who are citizens of the United States and loyal to our government. The United States has always adhered to the plan of giving instruction in military and naval tactics to its young men through the national guard and naval militia without taking them from their regular occupations, but the training of seamen is more serious and complicated and the government can well afford to make a special effort to build up this body of men. To accomplish this result laws should be enacted for the enlistment of American citizens in the United States navy who will be available for service on vessels of United States registry engaged in the ocean-carrying trade. The government should pay a certain percentage of their wage while in the employ of merchant vessels, and the men and the vessels should always be available and subject to the call of the navy. This plan would apply also to regular officers of the navy. To make this work effective the government should detail a naval officer to each of the vessels on which a sufficient number of men are employed, to drill them in naval tactics, so that while learning seamanship by force of their employment they would also be trained in the work of the navy.

It is claimed for this plan that the men are always in useful and productive employment and that in this way the government would be building up a defense that would complement its regular navy; that the personnel of this productive class of men could be maintained on a higher plane than the men engaged in non-productive work on the war vessels; that both men and officers would have other and better purposes in life because they would be engaged as producers, and their whole thought would not be devoted to war and the advantages which would come to them in case of troubles with other countries. While this country must always maintain an efficient navy, the upbuilding of this body of enlisted men and effective vessels

will lessen the need of non-productive and expensive war vessels.

I am thoroughly convinced that the people of this country would support with enthusiasm any reasonable plan that promised the establishment of a mercantile marine on a permanent and business basis. They would much prefer to see a fleet of convertible greyhounds engaged in commerce than one unnecessary dreadnought, and many believe that these vessels would be a greater protection and safeguard to the nation than too many war vessels which today may be considered most efficient and tomorrow, with changing conditions, may become junk. People of this country would be proud of a mercantile marine, but would never be proud of a navy beyond the demands of the country for strictly defensive purposes.

This principle is recognized already in the postal service between the United States and foreign ports, where a provision is made for officers of the navy to obtain service on mail vessels and receive furlough pay from the government while in such service, and in the same law requiring all vessels under contract with the United States government to employ at least one American-born boy for each thousand tons registered, to be educated in duties of seamanship while in such employment. The people of this country demand the enactment of laws that will build up our mercantile marine, and Congress must find a way to accomplish this purpose.